

Looking for interpreter zero: (5) Dragomans

The Eastern Mediterranean was a hodgepodge of languages. The Ottoman Empire had a need – and a word – for interpreters.

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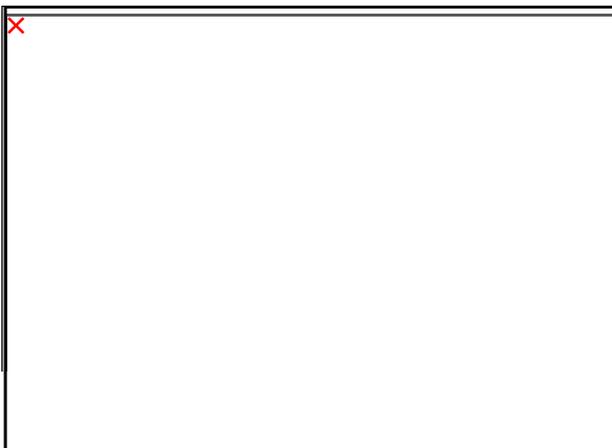
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The Ottoman Empire was bound to need interpreters. In the sixteenth century it extended into Central Europe, Crimea, the Middle East and Africa (see map below) and had a mixed population speaking a variety of languages. It also attracted outsiders: traders, travellers and diplomats. Not everyone needed an intermediary as multilingualism or the use of a *lingua franca* enabled communication within the Empire and throughout the Mediterranean. For official purposes, however, the authorities needed interpreters to communicate with their own people as well as with foreigners. These men were known as *dragomans*, from the Turkish term ‘*tercüman*’, itself derived from the Arabic ‘*tarjuman*’, meaning translator, interpreter or guide.

Fairly little is known about what went on in the provinces where non-Turkish speakers needed assistance. There are records of those who worked for provincial governors, for the court – the Sublime Porte - and for the western embassies in Istanbul. I shall be concentrating on the latter two just to get a sense of the presence of dragomans in Istanbul.

After the fall of Constantinople, Greek or Italian was often used in communications between the Empire and the nations of Europe. In the sixteenth century, as trade and traffic increased, an elite idiom developed at the court, combining Arabic and Persian with Turkish vernacular.^[1] Whatever informal possibilities were afforded for communication by the polyglot ruling class, dragomans were needed for formal meetings.

The way the profession developed was informed by two constants of Ottoman life: Muslims were as a rule reluctant to learn the languages of foreigners (or infidels) and it was considered inappropriate for those same infidels to learn Turkish or Arabic. As well as being loath to encourage their nationals to learn foreign languages, until the eighteenth century the Ottoman authorities were reluctant to establish embassies abroad.



For the court, one early solution was to enlist converts to Islam, some of whom were captives who had been obliged to become Muslim. There is constant reference to ‘renegades’ in the literature: men of Italian, Greek, Austrian, Hungarian, German or Polish origin who were captured in battle and ended up as the Sultan’s interpreters or representatives. From the seventeenth century the post of Grand Dragoman of the Sublime Porte was the preserve of Istanbul’s ethnic Greeks, well-connected families with

significant political clout.

These dragomans all had different backgrounds and stories. Early ones included **Yunus Bey** (1525 – 1551), a Greek from Modon, which the Venetians lost to the Ottomans in 1500; **Ibrahim Bey** (1551 – 1571), formerly Strasz, a minor Polish nobleman, and **Mahmud Bey** (1573 – 1575) a Bavarian nobleman.^[ii] These men and those who worked with them had many roles to play: they translated letters, served as intermediaries at meetings with diplomats or emissaries from foreign powers, settled border disputes, and sometimes accompanied or even represented the Sultan on missions.

Ibrahim Bey's story is fairly well-documented. He was sold to the Turks by his Tartar kidnappers in 1537 and joined a number of renegades serving at the court. He was reportedly competent in Latin, Italian and German as well as Polish and Turkish. After he took over as Chief Interpreter, he was involved in correspondence – demands for reparations, complaints about piracy as well as routine diplomatic letters, meetings and missions. In 1562 he travelled to Vienna and Frankfurt for the signing of the treaty between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, and to attend Maximilian's coronation as successor-designate. He had 56 attendants as well as gifts for Ferdinand I which included 73 horses and six camels. He gave a speech in Polish at the Coronation, which was circulated in German, Czech and Latin. ^[iii]

The diplomats in Istanbul were critical of the Sublime Porte dragomans; they accused them of greed, corruption, incompetence and duplicity. Ibrahim Bey was accused by a French ambassador of selling copies of French diplomatic despatches, and was later charged with taking bribes to falsify translations. These sensitivities were such that foreign embassies in Istanbul began to make their own arrangements, starting with the Venetians in the sixteenth century. Their dragomanate was recruited from among loyal subjects: Venetian citizens, noblemen from colonies in the Adriatic and eastern Mediterranean and members of the Latin (Roman Catholic) community of Pera, a suburb of Istanbul. Apprentice dragomans lived in the home of the Venetian *bailo* (permanent representative in Istanbul) and underwent at least seven years of training. The three groups of recruits did not remain separate: by the mid-seventeenth century there were a number of dragoman dynasties in Istanbul - which of course meant there were Venetian concerns about their loyalty! ^[iv]

Such concerns were a constant at the Porte for as long as dragomans played a central role in European-Ottoman relations. They were key intermediaries with access to prized information and intelligence, and enjoyed exceptional privileges. They could also easily become vulnerable messengers. This was made clear in 1821 when the ethnic Greek Chief Dragoman was executed on suspicion of involvement with the Greek rebellion against the Ottomans. The authorities established a new Translation Chamber that started training their own Turkish mother-tongue, Muslim dragomans in 1833.

Read the previous chapters of Looking for interpreter zero

- (1) [Christopher Columbus and the "Indians"](#)
 - (2) [Enrique, Magellan's slave interpreter](#)
 - (3) [Melchor, Julián, Pedro, Géronimo and Marina](#)
 - (4) [Marina/Malintzin/La Malinche](#)
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^[i] Dursteler, E.R. (2012). "Speaking in Tongues: Language and Communication in the Early

Modern Mediterranean”. In *Past and Present*, No. 217 (1): pp 47-77. Oxford University Press.

[ii] Veinstein, G. (2000). “The Ottoman Administration and the Problem of Interpreters.” In *The Great Ottoman-Turkish Civilisation*, Volume III, edited by Kaml Çisek, pp 607-15 Ankara: Yeni Türkiye.

[iii] Conley, T. (2002). “The Speech of Ibrahim at the Coronation of Maximilian II”. In *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, Vol. 20, No. 3, p 266.

[iv] Rothman, E.N. (2009). “Interpreting Dragomans: Boundaries and Crossings in the Early Mediterranean.” In *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 51, Issue 4, pp 771-800. Cambridge University Press.

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